

The Green Classroom



By Angela Neville, JD, REM

Environmental education (EE) is starting to move beyond the ivied walls of college campuses. Although most of us environmental professionals received our foundation in environmental learning from university classes, the lessons shouldn't stop there.

Even after acing our sheepskins, many of us still have continuing obligations to participate in EE classes because we are state-licensed engineers, geologists, or attorneys, or we're members of professional associations like the National Registry of Environmental Professionals (www.nrep.org) and the Academy of Hazardous Materials Managers (www.achmm.org). In addition to the traditional live lecture form of classes, we now can rack up our continuing education units through various other formats like listening to audiotapes or participating in online courses and live Webcasts.

EE, however, should not be the exclusive domain of professionals. As responsible members of our society, we all need to increase our understanding about how our environment functions so we can better protect it from the pressures of mounting industrialization and soaring population growth. EE is an important priority with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) because it increases public awareness and knowledge of environmental issues and challenges. The National Environmental Education Act of 1990 (20 United States Code 5501) requires EPA to provide national leadership to increase environmental literacy. As a result of the passage of this law, EPA established the Office of Environmental Education within the Office of Public Affairs.

EPA's position is that, through EE, people gain an understanding of how their individual actions affect the environment, acquire skills that they can use to weigh various sides of issues, and become better equipped to make informed decisions. EE also gives our citizens a better understanding of the environment and, hopefully, will inspire them to take responsibility for its preservation and restoration. For more information about EPA's initiatives related to EE, go to www.epa.gov/enviroed.

Additionally, EE is increasingly becoming an essential part of our young people's school curricula. Educating students in elementary school through high school about the importance of environmental science and policy issues is crucial because we are shaping our next generation of environmental professionals and citizens who will help to determine our country's future governmental policies related to the environment. In his article in this month's issue, author

Anthony J. Sadar, a certified consulting meteorologist and a member of the general education faculty at the University of Phoenix-Pittsburgh Campus, discusses the techniques that are being used successfully to help students understand concepts that involve invisible content and processes, such as air dispersion modeling. He points out that revised teaching methods, such as computer-generated images, can help students achieve a deeper understanding of the microscopic world. The goal is to elevate learning for students beyond rote knowledge and to foster critical thinking, analyzing, and problem-solving skills related to real world environmental challenges.

The great majority of us in the environmental profession see our work as a source of personal growth and an opportunity to make a positive impact on the world around us. One of our goals should be to help our nation's young people by giving them the ideas, the tools, and the inspiration to deal with both today's and tomorrow's environmental challenges.

Several leading professional organizations have programs to promote the education of young students. For example, the Air & Waste Management Association (www.awma.org/education) has created an award-winning teacher-training program for teachers who teach Grades K-12. Designed by AWMA members as a supplementary curriculum, environmental resource guides help students learn about environmental issues such as air quality and nonpoint source pollution prevention.

In a similar vein, the members of the Water Environment Federation (www.wef.org/education) have taken the position that public education is an important key to preserving and enhancing the global water environment. They have developed a variety of educational tools, including coloring activities and elementary and secondary hands-on lesson plans in both English and Spanish. As well, they have created a full day educator's workshop on water quality called WEFTeach.

Likewise, the members of the American Water Works Association (AWWA) have put together a Web site (www.awwa.org/careercenter/studentcenter) that is intended to be a resource for both high school and college students seeking information about the water industry. The site offers up-to-date information about careers in the water industry, scholarships, internships, industry trends, and activities of AWWA student members and chapters.

We environmental professionals need to serve as leaders in our communities. Through both our professional and volunteer activities, we can share our specialized knowledge with others to work toward protecting and improving our environment.

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Angela Neville is editor-in-chief of Environmental Protection magazine and technical editor of Water & Wastewater Products. She may be contacted at an Neville@stevenspublishing.com.